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Unidextrous / Multilateral



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## The Times I Saw The Clash #1, 11.11.77



### The Clash Get Out of Control Tour @ Cambridge Corn Exchange



When two 11s clashed.

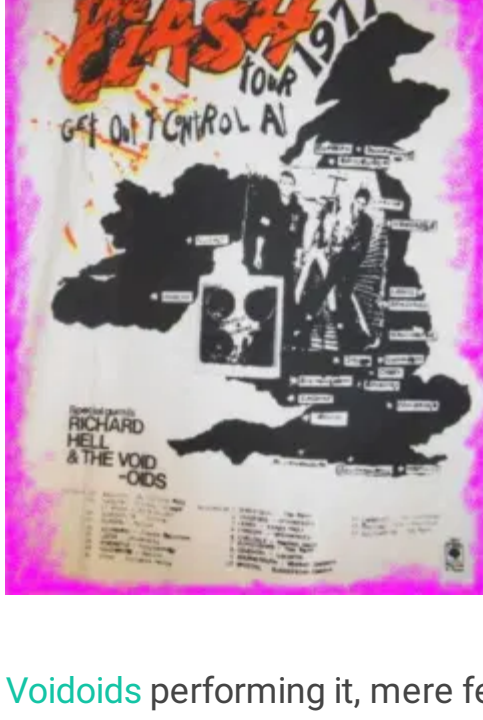
Ask what was the most impressive pop concert I ever saw and I don't have to think too hard. It was Prince & The Revolution at Madison Square Garden on the *Parade* tour in 1986. Amazing as that epic show was, however, it did not change my life. My life had already been changed by The Clash. The first time I saw the band was at the Corn Exchange in Cambridge, November '77. I had turned sixteen in September and was at boarding school in Stamford. We persuaded a liberal teacher to hire a mini bus and improvised a punk look. It wasn't hard, then: if you didn't have long hair & flared trousers, you stood out.



The collectable Clash badge set!

Going into the gig, a man on the door dispensed lapel badges that said, *'I Want Complete Control'*, which became a highly-prized trophy then and now, according to Robin from Clash City Collectors, 'the Complete Control badge has been copied a few times & should be quite cheap to pick up, but an original one would cost around £25 + P&P. Cheers.'

*Complete Control* was to be the gang's third single, written as an angry retort to their record company CBS and the latest of a kind of song in which The Clash mythologised their own experience as a band, which arguably started with *Garageband*. Charles Shaar Murray had quipped that The Clash were the kind of garage band who should be locked in with the car engine running, leading Strummer to come back with the immortal line, *'Back in the garage with my bullshit detector...'* After some humming & ahing and no little bullshit, The Clash had eventually signed to a major multinational record company in a move that the punk bible, *Sniffin' Glue* denounced as a sell out. Still, CBS had put out the emblematic first single, *White Riot*, backed with 1977: 'no Elvis, Beatles, or Rolling Stones!' But then, the record company guys didn't know what to do for a follow up, so they picked the nearest thing their sophisticated ears could hear to a memorable tune from the epochal first album and put out *Remote Control* as the second single, without clearing it with The Clash. *'They said, we'd be artistically free, made us sign a bit of paper,'* Joe ranted. *'They meant, let's make lots of money and worry about it later.'*



First on the bill was a group of female French Lou Reed fans called, 'The Lous'. I was more interested in checking out the crowd, with its characteristic Seventies smell of patchouli. It was not quite my first taste of rock action, exactly, but might as well have been. Most were older student types with long hair & flared trousers, come to investigate this new thing called punk rock with its sneering & spitting. They stood back, kept a critical distance, leaving ample room for excited teenagers to get to the front of the stage, which was low and not large. I can't recall from this distance if I had previously heard, *Blank Generation*, but I'll never forget the sight of [Richard Hell & The Voidoids](#) performing it, mere feet away.

Finally came The Clash. My memory has the Stuka backdrop, dive-bombing the stage, but it may be playing tricks. It would be an appropriate metaphor for their performance, though. The band kicked off at 100mph and accelerated through to *White Riot* at the end. Their version of *Police & Thieves*, midway through the set, offered little respite from the relentless fury of their music. Paul concentrated on his axe, lurking near Topper's drum riser and was not quite the upfront presence he later became. Mick, stage right in his zippered bondage strides, already had charisma & poise, not to mention riffs: "You're my guitar hero!" as Joe exclaimed on the new single.



**Strummer himself was the focus of my attention**, riveted by the intensity of his performance. Although mere feet away, he seemed to be in a different world, possessed, separated by a force field of energy that was palpable if not quite visible, except perhaps via ultra sensitive photography. I have a screen-printed poster made from [an iconic photo of Joe](#), taken maybe a month later, that I regard as an avatar of righteous rage and keep to remind me of those indignant teenage feelings channelled by Saint Joe.

I've looked around online for a set list and been disappointed, as some of the songs I've seen listed speculatively weren't written until later, but basically it was the first album: *Janie Jones & Protex Blue*. Joe inhabited the songs, acting out, [Career Opportunities](#) by flapping his arms, beside himself with frustration at being offered dull jobs. But then came [Garageland](#), with its bullshit detector, hinting at the possibility of breaking from mundanity and articulating one's truth.

When I say this gig changed my life, I mean, it was inspirational, hinting at a life much larger and more vivid than my cosseted schoolboy's existence. I wrote a delirious review that was printed in the school mag, to the headmaster's reported displeasure. Within a year, I was expelled from boarding school after hitch hiking to Cambridge to see another punk band at the Corn Exchange. We got stranded and were out all night. The day after they kicked me out, I remember, I consoled myself by buying a copy of the new Clash single, *(White Man) In Hammersmith Palais* in a pink paper sleeve, with the sub-Lichtenstein pop art label.



**ADDENDUM:** [\(White Man\) In Hammersmith Palais](#) was released in the same week that I was expelled from school, in June 1978. I had hitch hiked to Cambridge to see The Vibrators and The DPs, aka The Depressions, who were truly awful punk also-rans. I mean, The Vibrators were old men, but at least they had a tune or two, the title of one of which had been appropriated by Stiff Little Fingers. I wasn't too enthusiastic about this gig, but I had been assured of a

lift home from a graphic designer who worked in an office in Stamford that I had started cleaning as a part-time job, after school. (I inherited the job from a girlfriend who had gone to college.) The dude doubled after having been the original drummer with The Vibrators, so this was a chance to call his bluff. I guess it was a bluff, because he set off without us, leaving a note to say he'd see us there. But he didn't show up. Stranded, we had to walk home, most of the way, me and my mate. We walked from Cambridge nearly to Huntingdon and dawn was breaking when my mate eventually called his Dad, who lived not far away, and he came out to rescue us. Limping into the boarding house at five in the morning, there stood my house master, grimly.

"The police of three counties have been looking for you," he declared.

"Then why didn't they find me?" I wondered.

"I think you'd better go upstairs and pack," he said.

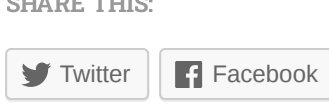
"You're joking," I said (he wasn't). "I'm going to bed."

Anyway, back at Hammy Pally, Dillinger, Leroy Smart and Delroy Wilson, the Cool Operator, headlined an all night reggae rave – "midnight-to-six, man" – that also featured Ken Booth, "for UK of pop reggae" with "backing bands & sound systems." But, Joe Strummer was disappointed to discover, that "it was Four Tops all night" with synchronis-ized dance routines along the lines of those perpetrated by the 4/4 Motown innovators, who also invented Norther Soul. Smiling performers would dance off and then dance on again "with encores from stage right," which I Jah Man Strummer found strictly silly. He had wanted and expected a militant rasta vibe, not close harmonies and syncopation.

In the lyric of the ensuing song, Joe compares the commercializ-isation of the reggae scene, as he perceives it, with what's going on in his own corner of the musical universe, where the new groups of the short-lived Power Pop craze were not concerned with what there was to be learned from grizzled punk veterans, but were busily wearing Burton suits, if you please, and – in an echo of the title of George Melly's seminal analysis of pop culture, *'Revolt Into Style': "turning rebellion into money."*

*"All over, people are changing their votes, along with their overcoats,"* objected Joe. Eric Capton, the guitar god, had made some drunken racist to be declared and inspired the formation of Rock Against Racism. Our beloved David Bowie, fully coked-up in Thin White Duke mode, when met by a massive crowd upon arrival at a London railway station, had stood up in the back of an open-topped car and thrown what looked a lot like a Nazi salute. *"If Adolf Hitler flew in today,"* sang Joe, *"they'd send a limousine anyway."*

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